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SUBJECT: Regional Leaders Urge U.S. to Push for Progress on
Arab-Israeli Peace during WEF Session on Regional Security

¶1. Summary: "If you had just two minutes with President Obama, what would you ask of him and what would you offer in return?" This was the first question posed to political leaders participating in a May 17 World Economic Forum (WEF) panel on regional security held in Jordan. Participants in the session included Prime Minister of the Palestinian National Authority Salam Fayyad, Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa, Vice President of Iraq Adil Abd Al-Mahdi, Prime Minister of Jordan Nader Dahabi, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Saltanov, and U.S. Representative Brian Baird (D-WA). All urged the U.S. administration to push for progress on the Arab-Israeli conflict, emphasizing that action rather than talk was expected and required this year. A common message was the need for a two-state solution that would ensure an independent, viable Palestinian state. Several urged that pressure be put on Israel to freeze and dismantle settlements as a precondition to negotiations. Regional leaders also argued for a comprehensive approach to establishing a new security order in the Middle East that would include both Syria and Lebanon, as well as a mechanism to address the Iranian nuclear issue. End Summary.

Call on U.S. to Push for Progress on Peace

¶2. Over 1,400 private and public sector representatives from 85 countries attended the May 15-17 World Economic Forum on the Middle East in Jordan. During a plenary session on "The Future of Middle East Peacemaking," key regional leaders called on the new U.S. administration to push progress on resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict, which they said lies at the core of instability in the region. Dahabi led off by advocating a two-state solution in which a viable, independent Palestinian state can live side-by-side in peace with its neighbors. He urged that President Obama should use his good offices to urge Israel to stop settlements, improve living conditions for Palestinians, and move forward with negotiations. In return for settlement of the conflict, "we would offer recognition of Israel by 57 Muslim states, confidence building measures, and Israel's security and peace in this area," Dahabi proclaimed.

Israel Needs to Stop and Dismantle Settlements

¶3. Before negotiations can continue, according to Fayyad, concrete steps need to be taken by each side in order to bolster and give credibility to the process. He called on Israel to fully comply with its obligations under the Roadmap, freeze settlement construction, stop incursions into areas under Palestinian control, and ensure freedom of movement. In return, he promised to build strong, competent Palestinian state institutions.

¶4. Moussa said he would thank President Obama for the new spirit and positive environment he has created by calling for new solutions. He agreed that the situation in the region had become "unstable and dangerous and [President Obama] should properly address the Arab-Israeli conflict and, in particular, the Palestinian issue. There must be a viable Palestinian state and a comprehensive peace that should involve Syria and Lebanon." He added that the freezing of settlements and dismantling by the Israelis of at least the outer posts, especially those considered "illegal," was a "sine qua non" for any for negotiations. He stated that it was "our mistake" to negotiate in the past while settlements continued.

All Parties Need to Be Assured of Their Security

¶5. Qualifying that he was just one member of the U.S. Congress, Representative Baird argued for immediate cessation of settlements, removal of checkpoints to increase commerce, and continued support for Abu Mazen. He emphasized, however, the need to provide security for all parties. While the U.S. will push Israel to stop building settlements, "you have to assure your neighbor that their security is assured...by denouncing rocket attacks and denouncing those who say we should wipe Israel off the face of the earth," Baird stated. In response to a question as to whether President Obama can deliver, Baird replied that he believed the President can, is committed to doing so, and has the support of the American people and Congress.

Role of Non-Proliferation in New Security Order

¶6. In his two minutes with President Obama, Al-Mahdi said he would first ask the U.S. to respect plans to withdraw from Iraq by 2011. He would also advise the U.S. to engage in dialogue with Iran, raising the issue of nuclear non-proliferation as key to future regional stability. "We can't let Israel stay armed and the rest be disarmed," he averred. Mousa echoed his sentiments, saying that Arabs and people in the region see the most dangerous issue for them as Israel's nuclear arms, not Iran's. Dahabi argued that Middle Eastern countries have the right to obtain nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, but countries need to join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. He advocated for a regional approach to all problems in the Middle East, particularly after the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq, adding: "Everybody knows that Iran plays a role in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Arab-Israeli conflict and all these issues should be addressed as one package." Noting that the U.S. shares the goal of denuclearization, Representative Baird cautioned against including the complicated matter of non-proliferation and Iran in the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations at this time.

Need to Act - Not Talk - Now

¶7. All interlocutors concurred that time was of the essence and action must take place this year in order for the peace negotiations to regain credibility and momentum. Stating that no new proposals were needed given the Arab Peace Initiative, Dahabi asserted, "Enough is enough. Let's get results." After Saltanov suggested a multi-lateral approach through a Moscow conference, Fayyad responded by welcoming the initiative but noting that "parties don't want a meeting for the sake of meeting," and the bar needs to be set higher. He also cautioned that even if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu officially accepts a two-state solution, "everything is not yet settled."

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